



## **Space for Nature: a review of England's wildlife sites and ecological network**

### **A response by the English National Park Authorities Association**

**February 2010**

#### **Introduction**

1. The English National Park Authorities Association (ENPAA) exists to provide a collective voice for the nine English National Park Authorities. It is governed by the Chairs of the nine Authorities, and our response represents the collective view of the Authorities. It has been prepared by officers, working within the policies established by the National Park Authorities. ENPAA welcomes the scope and timing of the review as we look forward to developing a strategy for biodiversity conservation in England beyond 2010.
2. Excluding the South Downs National Park that was designated in November 2009, the 9 National Parks in England cover 8.1% of England's land area. National Parks support rich and diverse habitats and wildlife and over 25% of all land in England's National Parks is designated as SSSI, totalling 2,849 sq km. This represents some 27% of land in the whole of England designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). In addition, National Parks contain significant areas that are important for wildlife but have no legal protection. Within England's National Parks, 28% of nationally important semi natural habitats currently have no designation.
3. We believe that National Park Authorities can play an important role alongside other agencies, local authorities and the voluntary and private sectors, to provide an integrated approach to land management in National Parks that helps to deliver a wide range of public benefits and respond to key challenges including climate change. Given their geographical focus and statutory remit, National Park Authorities are well placed to engage local communities, farmers and land managers in the conservation and enhancement of the National Parks, including biodiversity.
4. National Park Authorities have a statutory duty to prepare a National Park Management Plan and to review this at least every five years. These plans start from an understanding of the state of the National Park environment and provide an integrated strategy for the National Park area seeking environmental, social and economic outcomes. Conservation of biodiversity plays an important part of these plans which are landscape scale in approach and extend beyond those sites specifically designated for their ecological interest.

## Consultation Questions

1. What do you consider to be the characteristics of a coherent and resilient ecological network and what would you expect it to deliver?

At a national level, it is clear that, whilst there have been many significant achievements, the current approach to habitat and species conservation is not sufficient to halt biodiversity loss.

It is now widely recognised by those involved in biodiversity conservation that the future approach will need to go beyond the designation of a series of 'representative' sites for biodiversity protection and adopt a wider, landscape-scale approach. At the same time, any approach that encompasses a larger proportion of land will need to consider multiple objectives alongside that of biodiversity conservation.

Together, the designated and non-designated semi-natural habitats within National Parks provide some of the best remaining large, ecologically coherent semi-natural habitat in England. It follows that National Parks provide an ideal opportunity to develop a more comprehensive approach that will sustain and enhance these important habitats and provide greater linkage through habitat networks within the National Parks themselves and beyond National Park boundaries.

At the core, we believe that the future approach should ensure that there is a good number of sites of a high biodiversity value and diverse habitat type that are in favourable condition and have long-term [at least 50 years] mechanisms in place to ensure their conservation management.

We would advocate an approach that:

- ensures that favourable status is achieved and maintained for 'core' sites of highest biodiversity value
- extends this approach to all important semi-natural habitat including that which is not currently designated
- seeks to restore and develop linking areas to form more comprehensive and robust habitat networks at a landscape scale
- establishes linking habitat corridors of sufficient scale (i.e. 1 km) that are permeable to wildlife across the country including in areas of intensive land use for other purposes (particularly food production), high development and urbanisation.

In developing the linked network of sites consideration should also be given to buffer areas around them where biodiversity is a key management objective. This does not need to necessarily be the same type of habitat, but would include areas with less intensive management. Similarly, the linking corridors will encompass a wide range of habitat types.

The resource requirement for such an approach will be considerable and the strategy will need to achieve the best outcomes from the resources available. For example, whilst being generally supportive of efforts to achieve 'favourable' condition in existing designated sites, we believe that there are likely to be circumstances where greater biodiversity benefits will be achieved by bringing non-designated areas into better management, or on the creation of new habitats or less-intensive land uses, where areas can contribute to the developing networks.

In setting management objectives for an area, full consideration also needs to be given to other objectives in addition to biodiversity as we seek to optimise the public benefits from our land resource. This includes considerations of landscape quality; tranquillity; archaeology and cultural heritage; access and recreation, etc.

It follows that, whilst the overall objective of the strategy for biodiversity conservation is to provide sufficient space and variety of habitat types across the landscape to enable species to survive and adapt to environmental change, these areas should not be seen solely as wildlife 'reserves' but would serve a multitude of purposes. These purposes would include

access and quiet recreation and, where appropriate, enhancement of water quality; management of flood risk; carbon sequestration and other ecosystem services.

National Park Authorities have a great deal of experience in working to achieve multiple land use objectives working closely with communities and the owners and managers of land and this is reflected in the National Park Management Plans and a range of policy position statements. For example, the ENPAA position statement on climate change already reflects a commitment by National Park Authorities to:

"continue to work to protect and develop resilient habitat networks that allow natural environment adaptation, providing ecological links both within National Parks and across the wider countryside. This is a priority in the Local Biodiversity Action Plans that we work on with partners. We recognise that stewardship of carbon stores is also about adaptation: the maintenance of healthy, well-linked habitats includes managing upland water, which has the potential to provide benefits to downstream urban areas through the alleviation of flooding and improvement to water quality. Wildfire management during dry periods is also vital to protect these carbon stores."

ENPAA position statement on climate change is available at:

[http://www.enpaa.org.uk/enpaa/whatsnew/climate\\_change\\_statement.htm](http://www.enpaa.org.uk/enpaa/whatsnew/climate_change_statement.htm)

Clearly, the development of such a system has significant implications for the owners and managers of land, particularly those engaged in farming and forestry. National Park Authorities are working with farming, landowning and conservation interests to pilot approaches that will help to underpin the viability of traditional farming by providing better financial recognition for the wide range of public benefits that they deliver.

Similarly, any strategy to achieve the type of vision that we advocate in this short response will need to take account of land ownership; land values; new and existing market mechanisms for goods and services, and the optimal use of limited public resources such as those available through the Common Agricultural Policy.

### **Some relevant case studies**

All English National Park Authorities are active in species and habitat conservation within their areas and set strategic Park-wide objectives within the National Park Management Plans. Some specific examples of detailed work to link and extend habitat networks include:

- North York Moors National Park Authority – habitat networks project. This study has mapped key habitats including ancient woodland and semi-natural grasslands within parts of the North York Moors National Park to develop a series of linked habitat networks.
- Broads Authority has a major strategy for restoration of the habitats and biodiversity value of the Norfolk Broads. The biodiversity action plan for the Broads includes a mapping exercise setting out opportunities for new habitat development. See <http://www.broads-authority.gov.uk/managing/broads-biodiversity-action-plan/more-information-on-the-bap-opportunity-map.html>
- In the Peak District National Park, the Moors for the Future project is working to restore large areas of degraded peatland habitat on a landscape scale. <http://www.moorsforthefuture.org.uk/mftf/main/Home.htm>
- In Exmoor National Park, following a successful programme over the last 3 years, plans are being developed for an extensive programme of peatland restoration with a major

funding support from South west Water. See [http://www.exmoor-nationalpark.gov.uk/index/learning\\_about/looking\\_after\\_landscape/moorlands/mire.htm](http://www.exmoor-nationalpark.gov.uk/index/learning_about/looking_after_landscape/moorlands/mire.htm)

- In the South West, Dartmoor and Exmoor National Park Authorities are actively involved in a regional initiative to help sustain traditional approaches to livestock farming in the three main upland areas in the region. Both are members of the South west Uplands Task Force that brings together farming and landowning interests with regional organisations such as the Regional Development Agency, Natural England and Environment Agency; voluntary organisations such as the National Trust and RSPB, and private sector organisations such as Duchy of Cornwall and South West Water. A key area of work currently underway is a study on means to better reward and sustain the wider public benefits that arise from farming in upland areas.

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